

*Citation for published version:*

Donnelly, M 2015, 'Progressing to university: hidden messages at two state schools', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 85-101. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3136>

*DOI:*

[10.1002/berj.3136](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3136)

*Publication date:*

2015

*Document Version*

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication](#)

## University of Bath

### Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:  
[openaccess@bath.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@bath.ac.uk)

#### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

#### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# **Progressing to university: hidden messages at two state schools**

Michael Donnelly<sup>1</sup>

*University of Bath, UK*

## **Abstract**

This paper considers some of the ways that schools might play a role in shaping higher education decision making. Through their everyday practices and processes, schools may carry hidden messages about progression to higher education, including choice of university. The kinds of routine aspects of school life dealt with here include events and activities, interactions with teachers, as well as resources. The work of Basil Bernstein proved particularly useful at elucidating the kinds of messages about higher education choice that may be carried by these everyday aspects of schools. By shining a light on the underlying structures of power and control, Bernstein's framework illuminates the mechanisms by which messages may be sent out. To illustrate this, two case study schools (both based in the same urban locality in south Wales) are drawn upon here, which were purposefully selected on the basis of their varied rates of progression to higher education. The implications of the role played by schools are discussed in the context of the prevailing inequalities in higher education participation, rising tuition fees, and an increasingly uncertain graduate labour market.

**Keywords:** hidden curriculum, Basil Bernstein, school effects, higher education participation

## **Introduction**

---

<sup>1</sup> *Department of Education, 1 West North, University of Bath, Bath, BA2 7AY*

This paper considers the role played by schools in shaping young peoples' higher education (HE) decision making. Understanding the kinds of messages schools send out about HE choices is important on a number of different levels. There remains a persistent gap in access to HE according to socio-economic status (Kelly and Cook 2007). Inequalities exist not only at the point of entry, but also in a more nuanced form within the hierarchical layers of the HE system itself. Those from lower social class groups are much less likely to enter what are considered the more 'prestigious', research-intensive higher education institutions (HEIs) (Boliver 2011). Schools have often been called upon to do more to broaden HE participation, particularly in terms of entry to research-intensive HEIs (Curtis et al. 2008, National Council for Educational Excellence 2008). In England, increasing pressure on schools from Government in relation to their HE admissions may be encouraging them to place more emphasis on the support and guidance they provide (BBC News 2011). However, in Wales, where there is less of an emphasis on performativity, and no league tables showing HE destinations, schools are less likely to be feeling under the same pressure.

The majority of research exploring HE choice has tended to focus more on the importance of factors outside of the school. Indeed, the importance of social class, gender and ethnicity in mediating progression to HE and research-intensive HEIs is well documented (Pugsley 2004, Reay et al. 2005). Educational decision making has been conceived of as an embedded social practice (Heath et al. 2008), with decision making for the working classes characterised as a solitary activity (Reay 1998). In contrast, progressing to university, and research intensive HEIs, is often implicitly assumed and expected for those from higher social class groups, whose stores of cultural and social capital help facilitate choice (Allat 1993, Power et al. 2003).

There has been comparatively less attention paid to the role played by schools in shaping HE choices. When the school has been considered, its influence has more often than not been understood by drawing on the concept of institutional habitus, which extends Bourdieu's (1990) work on the individual habitus and applies this to educational institutions. Institutional habitus has been defined as a set of dispositions and behaviours which are the product of a school's past experiences, staff and pupils (Ingram 2009, Reay et al. 2005, Pugsley 2004). The school is conceived of as constrained by its intake, which predisposes it to adopting particular practices and processes:

Here we can see how wider socio-economic cultures impact on organisational practices within schools and colleges in ways which ... also shape opportunities and constraints within the higher education choice process

(Reay et al. 2001a, online)

A number of important studies in the UK and America have drawn upon this concept to help explain the ways in which schools mediate HE choices (Pugsley 2004, Reay et al. 2005, McDonough 1997). Private schools and state schools with predominantly middle class catchments are conceived of as facilitating, through their high levels of support, progression to HE and research-intensive HEIs. At the same time, schools with more disadvantaged intakes are often conceived of as constrained, and unable to provide the same high level of support, due to the social characteristics of their intake. In extending further this body of knowledge, the present study adopts a different theoretical approach, which pays attention to the implicit messages carried within school contexts, often referred to as the 'hidden curriculum'.

## **Cultural and social dimensions of schooling**

The rather ambiguous idea of a 'hidden curriculum' has been used to refer to all of the learning that takes place within school in addition to the formal curriculum offer. This includes all of the socialising practices contributing to the reproduction of culture, such as gender roles within society. From this perspective, schools are not conceived of as neutral transmitters of knowledge. Instead, embedded within the very fabric of them are often implicitly held norms, values, beliefs, expectations and values. However, young people are not necessarily passive recipients of such knowledge. Indeed, they may well be differentially and powerfully socialised by other more important influences in their lives.

An important aspect of the school context are the everyday interactions between teachers and pupils, which may carry hidden messages. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) have examined school practices in relation to the GCSE options process. Based on observations of interactions between teachers and year nine pupils in two state schools, they identified discursive practices which emphasised the importance of achieving the coveted benchmark of five higher grade passes at GCSE. These interactions carried implicit messages about which subjects pupils should choose, according to their perceived academic ability. Those considered to have high levels of academic ability were 'warmed up' for history and geography, but 'cooled down' for sociology. The discursive practices operating here reduced the range of options presented to pupils and sent out messages about the kinds of subjects they should consider.

The timetable, events, artefacts and other taken for granted aspects of the school context can also carry hidden messages. Schools are constrained by the finite amount of time they have available; the selection, ordering and arrangement of content to fill this time signifies what they

prioritise as most important (Ball 1984). In this way, school timetables carry implicit messages about what is most important and what teachers and pupils should be doing. The different kinds of events and artefacts evident in schools can also carry implicit messages. Maguire et al.'s (2011) research in four secondary schools explored some of the ways in which discursive artefacts and activities carried within them some of the key policy discourses present in the UK education system. They showed how everyday artefacts, such as displays and posters, as well as routine events including meetings and presentations, both carried underlying messages about what constitutes a 'good' pupil, teacher, and school.

### ***Bernstein's theoretical work***

Bernstein's (1975) theoretical work on educational transmissions can provide a way of understanding the hidden kinds of messages which are carried by schools. In particular, his paired concepts of *classification* and *frame* help make sense of the underlying structures of power and control. Classification is used to refer to the degree of separation between contents and so gives the basic structure of the curriculum in schools. Frame, on the other hand, refers to the degree of control within the pedagogical relationship, and specifically 'the degree of control teacher and pupil possess over the selection, organization, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship' (Bernstein 1975, p. 89).

The concepts also have utility for making sense of the kinds of messages schools send out about choice and progression to university (Donnelly 2014). In one sense, classification can be used to help make sense of the boundaries created at an organisational level in schools and the kinds of messages this might send out. For example, boundaries may be formed from the separation of resources in school, whilst other boundaries can be created by the division of pupils into

different groups. On another level, classification is helpful at elucidating the boundaries between different kinds of post-school choices, including different destinations within HE. For instance, some teachers could present the HE system as highly differentiated and hierarchical through their interactions with young people. At the same time, the concept of frame is useful at making sense of the degree of control pupils possess within the context in terms of the range of post-school options, and HE destinations, which are mentioned. For example, only HEIs that are members of the Russell Group (a university 'mission' group consisting of 24 research-intensive HEIs based in the UK) might be mentioned to pupils during some events within school, thus narrowing the range of possible HE choices.

Bernstein's (1975) conceptual framework, including the concepts used here, have attracted criticism on a number of different levels (Atkinson 1985). In one sense, his concepts might be considered problematic for some because of the way in which institutional mechanisms are conceived of as distinct from external factors. Other conceptualisations of the school place an emphasis on the ways in which institutional factors are shaped by internal and external factors over time and place. More distributed theories, such as distributed cognition, stress the importance of these inter-relations between external and internal factors (Hutchins and Klausen 2000). For some, it is difficult to conceive of institutional factors as autonomous variables in the way that Bernstein's framework might seem to imply.

That said, other empirical research has questioned the importance of external factors in shaping institutional practices and processes. Oliver and Kettley's (2010) study identified qualitative differences in the practices of schools in relation to university preparation that were not always related to their intake characteristics. In this sense, institutional factors might be seen as potentially independent variables capable of manipulation. Indeed, Bernstein's concepts have

been successfully drawn upon in the same way within a number of studies exploring a variety of educational problems (Aggleton and Whitty 1985, Morais et al. 2001, Muller et al. 2004, Walford 2002, Walford 2007). Walford (2002) used Bernstein's concepts of classification and frame in his study exploring the nature of the religious curriculum in Dutch and UK schools. The concepts were found to be useful at elucidating the extent to which religious teaching had been integrated within different kinds of school curricula.

In focussing on how schools might influence HE choices, this paper differs from past research which has tended to focus attention on factors outside of the school. It also differs in its theoretical approach to understanding the school. Instead of Bourdieu (1990), the analysis draws on Bernstein's (1975) theoretical framework to help make sense of the ways in which schools might shape HE choices.

## **The study**

In exploring the role played by schools on HE choices, this paper draws on research carried out in two case study schools based in the same urban locality in south Wales. These two schools were selected on the basis of their similar Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) take-up rates (around 20%), but differing proportions of their 'qualified' students who progressed to HE and research-intensive HEIs (table 1). EMA is a means-tested grant for those who continue in their studies after the compulsory phase, which is still available in Wales, and was used here as a proxy measure for the social class characteristics of their intakes. This might provide a



better indicator of the social composition of a school's sixth form, as opposed to take-up of Free School Meals (FSM), which is a school wide measure.

*Table 1: Selected case study schools*

	<i>Maple Grove</i>	<i>Oakville</i>
'Qualified' <sup>1</sup> students entering: HE overall	93%	84%
Research intensive HEIs <sup>2</sup>	60%	51%

<sup>1</sup> 'Qualified' here denotes those achieving 120 or more UCAS tariff points for entry to HE overall, and 300 or more for progression to research intensive HEIs

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, research-intensive HEIs are those in the Russell Group and/or the Sutton Trust 13 categorisation of universities (those consistently ranked at the top of most university league tables)

Of course, attempting to 'match' schools in this way is always difficult, especially because it does not take into account the complexity of school contexts, in terms of intake characteristics and other in-school factors. There are unlikely to be any significant gender imbalances across the schools and so any differences between boys and girls in their aspirations are less likely to make a difference. However, ethnicity may be important, though this is likely to be closely connected with social class (Reay et al. 2005). Other in-school nuances may also be important, such as the influence of the head teacher or head of sixth form, which can be picked up on in any subsequent case study research.

Rich and detailed qualitative data was collected from these two case study schools, paying close attention to the more taken for granted aspects of school life, in an attempt to understand what might account for the quantitative disparities. Ethnographic methods were deployed,

which included interviews with young people and teachers, observation, and the collection of documents/artefacts. Ten students from each school were tracked during their two years in the sixth form until they left at the end of year 13. Semi-structured interviews took place with these young people twice during this time, which explored their experiences at school and their plans for the future. Interviews also took place with around 4-5 teachers and careers advisors at each of these two schools. Events and activities were also observed, including assemblies, tutorial periods, HE preparation activities, presentations by universities, and ‘mock’ university interviews. A plethora of documents and other artefacts were also collected, including information booklets, ‘hand-outs’ distributed in lessons, and letters sent home to parents. Other artefacts which could not be removed from the school were also recorded including signs, notices, posters and other symbols. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect the anonymity of schools, teachers and the young people who took part.

### **Hidden messages about progression to HE**

This first section explores the qualitatively different practices and processes across the two schools, and the kinds of messages they sent out about progression to HE. Due to limitations of space, only the most important aspects of the schools are explored here, including events and activities, interactions with teachers, as well as resources and artefacts.

#### ***Events and activities***

Bernstein's (1975) concept of framing is helpful at elucidating how the underlying structure of events and activities, in terms of what content is selected, how it is ordered and arranged, can send out messages about what you should do after sixth form. Across the two schools explored here, their events and activities varied in the extent to which they framed post-school choices.

Strong framing of post-school choices was evident from the events and activities at Maple Grove school. No formal talks, events, or activities relating to any other route other than HE took place at this school. The prioritisation of HE in the school timetable, and exclusion of non-HE routes, therefore ensures strong framing of the situation. The school is exerting greater control here, which reduces the range of options open to pupils to HE alone. Other possible destinations, such as employment or apprenticeships, are less likely to be brought up or mentioned by teachers in this context, as the timetable constrains both teachers and pupils. In this way, the prioritisation of HE in school time controls what teachers are able to transmit, and what students are able to receive. Indeed, it was clear from the Head of year 12 that HE preparation took a high priority in the sixth form:

I have now been given a sort of 'bonus day' with the year group, so I'm going to make that another UCAS day, so that we can really keep the momentum going, because from the time when we had [the first 'HE day'] in June and then we are nagging them in November, it's just assemblies where you're nagging, rather than having a formal day to get things moving you know ... so I'm going to have to look at how I can fill that day meaningfully...

*Head of year 12, Maple Grove*

In the UK context, UCAS is an acronym for the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, which is the centralised body responsible for managing applications to most UK-based HEIs. Other preparation activities, such as advice about apprenticeships or employment, are entirely absent from the range of activities considered possible by Maple Grove's Head of year 12. In the summer of year 12, following their examination period, the sixth form pupils have periods of time away from their formal curriculum. In selecting content to fill this time, the school opted for HE preparation activities for two full days. These events held at Maple Grove followed a rigid timetable, with specific HE-related activities scheduled for each period, which ensured strong framing of the situation. The first of their 'UCAS days' began with a talk from a university speaker about the application process, including writing 'good' personal statements, which form part of their application to HE. For the next two periods, half of the year group spent the time in computer labs being guided by their form tutors in completing their university application online. At the same time, the rest of the year group worked through 'HE booklets', in-house produced, with their form tutor. Their first task was to think about the kinds of factors which might shape their choice of university. For the session which I observed, this involved the form tutor leading a discussion with sixth formers about choosing a university. In the second activity, form tutors talked about writing the personal statement, and students then began completing their first draft. Following lunch, and for the remaining two periods of the day, the students swapped over, with those who were in the computer labs before lunch now in their form rooms, and vice versa. The strongly framed situation narrowed the range of post-school options to HE alone, and offered little opportunity for any other destinations to be mentioned by either the sixth formers or their teacher. This could leave some Maple Grove students feeling unsure and anxious about their future after sixth form.

*Kelly:* ...you don't really- unless you are going to uni you don't really have many other offers that are- [presented to you], unless you put yourself out there to go and find someone and speak to them about it, unless you go to uni, you don't really like- I don't know- do you understand what I mean? It's not- you can do uni or you can, or we will try and help you, or you can do this, you can do this, this, and this, it's not- It's more like this is what uni is about, this is uni, this is-

Kelly, Maple Grove

At the same time, whilst Oakville also only held HE-related preparation events, the school did not appear to prioritise this to the same extent as Maple Grove. There were no day-long events focussed on HE, instead talks and other information sessions took place as part of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ). The WBQ offers a distinctive approach to organising the curriculum in Wales, which combines general and/or vocational education with the development of wider cultural, social and work related competencies (Welsh Government 2013). In the summer of year 12, following 'AS' examinations, the school selected a range of other activities during this time. Following a week of compulsory work experience, the students are involved in an 'enterprise week', which consists of activities aimed at developing the entrepreneurial skills of students. The enterprise week counts towards an element of their WBQ. However, it was the school which selected 'enterprise' as the activity which would count towards their WBQ. The Head of sixth form felt that it was important for students to develop enterprise skills as part of their sixth form career, which was perhaps instrumental in the prioritisation of these activities in school time. Other non-HE related activities also took up this free space on the school timetable, including helping out in the lower school's industry week, and other events, as highlighted by the careers advisor:

...you have got sports days and swimming galas- and- [laughs] this, that, and the other! Yeah it's a manic time of year it really is. Which as I say is a shame because then all the things about thinking about the future and universities, that's the crucial time that is getting crowded out by other things. I think it used to be different before you had the 'AS' exams, and the- you know you always had exams at the end of year 12, but they were internal exams, whereas now the AS exams are obviously so much bigger that has- obviously it has a priority, but as I say it has had a knock on effect of timing for other things as well...

*Careers advisor, Oakville*

The careers advisor draws attention here to the way in which HE preparation activities do not appear to be prioritised to the same extent as other activities in the allocation of school time. This allocation of school time indicates relatively weaker framing than was evident at Maple Grove, which may not make explicit to the same extent the importance of progressing to university.

### ***Teachers and careers advisors***

The different kinds of interactions between teachers, careers advisors and pupils about post-school destinations can also carry messages. During a form group session I observed at Maple Grove, it was evident that the teacher strongly framed the situation and thus reduced the range of post-school options presented to pupils:

... Miss Campbell then walks around the classroom with a clip board – she has a form listing students' names and is approaching different students and asking them: "What [university] course are you going for?" Some students respond quickly with their course.... "Psychology Miss". For other students, they don't say anything, at which point Miss Campbell prompts them by saying things such as... "You weren't sure which course were you..."... "Got any idea..."... "You were thinking English weren't you?"

*Field notes, Miss Campbell's year 12 form group, Maple Grove*

The strong framing evident in these interactions means that only HE is presented to students, with other possible routes totally absent. If the form tutor were to have weakly framed the interaction, she might have asked: "what do you want to do after school?"; instead of the more strongly framed: "which [university] course are you going for?". The former opens up a wider range of options, whilst the latter makes explicit a message that HE entry is the only route which you should follow.

This strong framing can also be seen from other aspects of the form tutor's involvement at Maple Grove. Each form tutor was responsible for keeping track of their students' progress in making their (HE) choices and completing their personal statement and application forms. They did this through closely monitoring individual students' progress in their day to day interactions with pupils during form time. Indeed, one student commented on how his tutor came round to each student every morning checking on their progress. The strong framing evident from these practices sent out messages to students that they should be actively pursuing HE entry.

Another important figure in relation to educational and career choices within the two schools was the careers advisor. In the Welsh context, careers advisors are employed by an external organisation to spend time in school providing individual careers consultations with pupils. They might also be drawn upon to deliver talks to groups of young people about their educational and career options. Subtle differences were evident between the schools in terms of the involvement of their advisor, and the ways in which the sixth form utilised them. At Maple Grove, the careers advisor did not give any talks to sixth form pupils about their future choices. It was an established practice that the Head of year 12 would give the advisor a list of students who had indicated to them that they did not wish to progress to HE, who the advisor would then contact to arrange individual appointments. This served to insulate HE (which the school dealt with) from employment (which the careers service was perceived to deal with), with this separation contributing to the explicit marking out of HE as the most appropriate route which students should pursue following sixth form. These strong boundaries made it explicit that HE entry was the 'norm' for students at Maple Grove, and that other destinations such as employment should not be considered.

In contrast, at Oakville, the careers advisor gave talks to the sixth formers about their options after school, and was also present on A-level results day to help students. Teachers would actively encourage all students to go and visit the careers advisor, and not just those students who were not considering HE at all. Indeed, the Head of year 12 felt that it was more appropriate for the students to seek guidance from the careers advisor, rather than from her:

*MD:* ...and do you get many students coming to you, asking for your advice on what they should do after school?



*Head of year 12:* Probably not as many as you might expect because they all have the opportunity to see the careers officer, and basically they are nagged about seeing the careers officer so they have got no excuse if they don't go and see her ...as I say a lot of them, they go to the careers officer and they get- they have got their ideas of subjects they want to do even if they don't know what they want to do at the end of it all, so they do a lot of finding out for themselves ....but some of them have got no idea at all, and all I can do then is send them off to the careers officer.

*MD:* Yeah, I suppose it's difficult to advise somebody who doesn't know what they want to do...

*Head of year 12:* Well, I am not the one with the skills in that area, I am the one that can point them in the right direction to the person who can tell them or figure it out for them...

This account highlights weak framing, as the Head of year 12 feels that it is important for students to find out for themselves about what to do. This weak framing sends out messages that you should explore the range of options yourself and decide what is best for you.

These subtleties in the ways in which the careers advisor was utilised by the two sixth forms are important given the weak framing of post-school choices evident within interactions between the advisor and young people. As shown here, the careers advisor at Oakville opens up a wider range of options other than HE entry:

...so it's about going through each of their options and then kind of coming up with things that they can do to research them, and then meeting again, because obviously my job is not to say "I think you should go to university", or "I think you should do this",

obviously it has got to be their decision so it's just making sure that they know what their options are, giving them time to go away and think about it, and then coming back, so you know to talk about it more, if they have got questions or if they then say "I've decided I want to go to university" then starting to talk about that, or if they say "well I think I would rather get a job" and then talking to them about what's available...

*Careers advisor, Oakville*

This approach taken by the careers advisor does not narrow down the different options for the student, but instead allows the student to select and organise the content themselves, and so opens up a wider range of possibilities. This makes it more possible for HE 'qualified' students to explore the range of other non-HE destinations which the careers advisor may draw their attention to, such as employment or apprenticeships. The advisor also told me that in her talk with the next cohort she plans to spend half the session talking about all their possible post-school destinations, and then the other half getting students to complete the 'pathfinder programme':

...[the pathfinder programme] will tell you all the possible jobs that you can do, and then if you find jobs that you like, it might tell you whether you need to go to university or not, or you might find that for the jobs that you want to do you don't have to go to university, or it will also tell you the university courses that you might be interested in, so I would encourage them to use that and then come back and see me with the results of what it came up with and then go through it with them...

*Careers advisor, Oakville*

The 'pathfinder' programme further illustrates the weak framing in the interactions between students and the careers advisor. There are a wider range of options mentioned within this interaction, which gives pupils a greater degree of control in thinking about their future choices. The programme does not narrowly define the choices you should make, but instead opens up a variety of different routes and options.

***Visible cues: resources and artefacts***

The two case study schools contained a plethora of resources and other artefacts relating to educational and career choices. These included university prospectuses, general HE guides, and other careers related and employment guides/resources. The selection, ordering, and arrangement of these can also send out implicit messages about HE choices.

Strong framing of post-school choices was evident from the arrangement of resources at Maple Grove. The HE resources are separated from all the other careers and employment related resources, and kept in the sixth form work room, in a highly prominent position surrounded by other visual imagery about HE, such as posters and leaflets. Other careers related resources, such as information about entering employment and apprenticeships, are separately located within the main school library away from the sixth form. Whilst all of the case study schools had these resources, it is their particular ordering and arrangement at Maple Grove which marks out university entry, and sends out messages that this is the route to follow. If the HE material was stored in the library alongside material about other destinations, then it would be the job of the student to select and order the context, and so decide what content they considered most appropriate for them, but as it is the sixth form is doing this selection on behalf of the student.

The students made extensive use of these prospectuses, which were often found scattered around the room.

...they have given us a billion prospectuses in the study for us to look at, so we have been overloaded with information really, so it has been good from that side. You don't have to look too far for it.

*Dean, Maple Grove*

Other resources and artefacts collected from the school similarly carried strongly framed messages about post-school choices, including two booklets produced by the school. The first of these booklets conveys information about making university choices, and how to fill in the UCAS application form, including specific guidance on the personal statement complete with exemplars. The second of these booklets contains worksheets on making university choices, including course and university 'analysis sheets' and exercises on completing the personal statement. The content is also reproduced within a section of the student planner given to every student at the beginning of year 12, making it highly visible and prominent. Students carry their planners around the school with them, and also take them home. They use them frequently to record their homework, and in doing so will be alerted to the content within them about HE entry.

A different ordering and arrangement of resources was evident at Oakville, which made explicit more weakly framed messages about post-school choices. The HE resources, which included copies of university prospectuses, were stored in the main school library alongside other general careers resources. The grouping of these materials together within the 'careers' section

of the library highlights the weak framing evident within this context. The acquirer is expected to select from the context themselves in terms of what they see as important. They are presented with not only HE as a possible option, but can consider other alternative routes. In this way, the more weakly framed situation here does not narrow down the range of possible post-school options to HE alone, as was the case at Maple Grove.

### **Hidden messages about the HE landscape**

The practices and processes of these two schools may have also sent out messages about choice within HE. This next section considers how events, activities, as well as interactions within the school contexts may have carried implicit messages about the HE landscape.

#### ***Events and activities***

The kinds of events and activities which happen in schools can also send out messages about destinations within HE itself. On their second 'HE day', Maple Grove organised an activity which sent out a strong classificatory message about the HE landscape. Ten former pupils, who had progressed to university and were approaching the end of their first year of study, were invited back to school to talk about their experiences at university. During the activity, former pupils gave separate talks and the current pupils could select which they wanted to hear.

Strong framing is evident from the selection of former pupils who are invited back to school to give the talks (table 2). With the exception of one former pupil, all of them came from pre-1992 universities. Six of the former pupils attended universities which are members of the Russell Group. This strong framing of the context reduced the range of universities the current pupils could hear about. They had almost no opportunity to hear about post-1992 universities. The school was exerting a greater degree of control within the context, which meant pupils had a narrower range of universities to hear about. In this way, the activity carried implicit messages that when choosing universities, you should opt for these kinds of institutions.

*Table 2: Former pupils' HE destinations (as listed by the school)*

<i>University</i>	<i>Course</i>
Imperial College London	Earth Sciences
Loughborough University	Sports Science
Cardiff University	Biology
University of Bath	Accounting & Finance
University of Birmingham	Medicine
University of Warwick	English/Creative Writing
Liverpool John Moores University	Primary Education Teaching and French
University of Exeter	Geography
Cardiff University	Law
Glasgow University	Psychology, Philosophy and Geography

This event also carried implicit messages about mobility and HE choice. The former students who are selected by the school mostly attend universities further afield, with only one student attending a university in Wales. This could be linked to the fact that there is only one university in Wales which is a member of the Russell Group (Cardiff University), which restricts the

school's choice of former students if it is only interested in selecting those from research-intensive institutions. However, universities are included from just about every region of the UK, with only institutions from other countries excluded. The underlying message here is that you should not restrict your choice of university by its geographical location in the UK. Universities all over the UK should be included in the pool of institutions you are considering. This is despite the fact that a significant proportion of students from the school choose Welsh HEIs, with 40% of the cohort who progressed to university in 2008 doing so.

### ***Teachers and careers advisors***

Interactions within school may also carry hidden messages about different kinds of higher education destinations. The kinds of things mentioned by teachers at Maple Grove sometimes made explicit a sense of separation between different HE destinations. This strong classificatory message presented the HE system as hierarchical and differentiated:

...[my teacher] talks about ... less about the UCAS application process... but more about which universities you should be applying for ... which... and my maths teacher also – she has got a few university guides, a couple of books, and she encourages you to look at them and to erm... and she knows more about the university process, I think she is more [of] an experienced teacher, she talks about the Russell Group and 1994 Group of universities, and yeah I haven't looked at her books yet, but I might have a look at the books she has got, I think she has got a Guardian book, a university guide...

*Ben, Maple Grove*

Ben's account shows how his teacher strongly classified the HE system, according to the league table position of universities. His teacher also strongly framed the interaction by selecting only Russell Group and 1994 Group HEI categories, and thus created boundaries around different types of HEIs which reduced the range of options open to Ben. Other HE providers, such as post-1992 HEIs or FE colleges, were not mentioned at all here. Strong classification and framing here marked out a differentiated HE system, and made explicit that students should progress to pre-1992 HEIs. Of course, the ways in which teachers might perceive the HE landscape is likely to be related at least to some extent to their own disciplines, biographies and experiences.

Other strongly framed situations at Maple Grove school also appeared to reduce the range of options open to pupils in terms of their HE choices. The following is an interaction which took place during the event when past pupils returned to school. It is between the former pupil who had progressed to Imperial College and a current sixth form pupil.

*Imperial College student:* Queen Mary's is good, that's good. Queen's is good for languages... what do you want to study?

*Sixth former:* Business.

*Imperial College student:* Yeah Queen's is good for that... and King's is good for that sort of thing. Have you looked at them yet?

*Sixth former:* I have looked at Queen's...

*Imperial College student:* Have you considered LSE for business?

*Sixth former:* Yeah, yeah – its 3As... and more than likely they want Maths...

*Imperial College student:* Yeah... LSE is very, very good and literally up the road from King's...



*Sixth former:* Oh right...

*Imperial College student:* But King's and Queen Mary's are both very good...

Whilst the former pupil might only be aware of these HEIs, strong framing is, nonetheless, evident here from the HEIs which the Imperial College student mentions, and neglects to mention, in answering the sixth former's question. The sixth former had asked about other universities in London, but the only London universities mentioned by the Imperial College student are research-intensive HEIs, with post-1992 HEIs entirely absent. This strong framing sends out messages that research-intensive HEIs are the most appropriate HE destinations which should be pursued. The former student is exerting a greater degree of control in this interaction, as they make it less possible for information about destinations other than research-intensive HEIs to be acquired. Any of the post-1992 HEIs in London, which also offer courses in Business, were much less likely to be brought up within this interaction.

At the same time, more weakly framed interactions with the careers advisor at Oakville presented young people with a wider range of university choices. No specific HEIs are selected or excluded by the careers advisor, which means that their HE choices are not narrowed down. One of the strategies which the advisor adopts in helping students to make their HE choices is to ask them to write down on a large sheet of paper all of the things which are important to *them* in *their* selection of a university:

...you have got to look at what you want and then come up with your own individual choices – well this is Jo Bloggs' good university list – you know, just because something is top in one league table doesn't mean that it's going to be top in your league table because it might not be in the area of the country you want to go to, or it might

not include something in the course that you want to do, so it's taking them with a pinch of salt and it's a starting point but it's doing that research to come up with your own equivalent of what's important to you...

*Careers advisor, Oakville*

We can see here how the careers advisor reduces the importance of published league tables, which hierarchically order HEIs according to their relative prestige. Instead, the advisor's approach gives a greater degree of power to the individual, enabling them to select possible HEIs according to their own worldview.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

This paper has explored some of the ways in which schools, like families, may differ in the kinds of messages they send out to their students about what is most appropriate, and what they should do, in terms of their post-school choices. Some schools might not make explicit any strong expectations about what students should do, whilst others may send out messages which do make clear a route that should be taken. Although school processes are not the same as family processes, there are some parallels here with the way in which middle class parents may not explicitly say "you have to go to university", but the expectation to do so is evident from the more invisible cultural processes within families (Pugsley 2004).

Comparing across the two schools explored here, distinctions are evident in some of their more taken for granted aspects including events, activities, interactions and resources. Strong

framing of post-school and HE choices was evident from events and activities held at Maple Grove, as only HE routes were mentioned and were heavily prioritised in school time. An event at this school also sent out messages that the HE system is differentiated and that you should progress to research-intensive HEIs. In contrast, Oakville did not appear to prioritise HE to the same extent, and sent out more weakly framed messages about post-school choices. The kinds of interactions that took place across these two schools also sent out different kinds of messages about choices. Strongly framed interactions at Maple Grove made explicit that you should progress to university and research-intensive HEIs, whereas the careers advisor's involvement at Oakville meant more weakly framed messages were transmitted. The arrangement of resources across the two schools also varied in subtle ways. The separation of HE resources at Maple Grove sent out a strongly framed message that you should pursue this route, whilst weaker framing was evident from the grouping of resources at Oakville.

In making visible the underlying structures of a school's message system, Bernstein's (1975) theoretical framework does not seek to make value judgements about educational contexts. At the same time, value judgements can be made about the two schools explored in this paper, on a number of different levels. On one level, judgements can be made about the degree to which schools should be directive in the educational and career choices of their young people. Maple Grove might be criticised for being too involved and thus to some extent inhibiting the trajectories of young people. In this sense, Oakville could be praised for empowering young people, enhancing their confidence and independence as they weave their own way through their myriad of possible choices. Their approach might be seen as more holistic, bringing longer term benefits to young people. On another level, Maple Grove might be judged more positively in the sense that strong framing might go some way to addressing inequalities within society. Oakville on the other hand might be seen by some as doing little to make a difference

in this regard. These kinds of judgements raise ethical, moral and practical issues in thinking about how educational institutions should support and guide young people within contemporary society. It was not within the scope of this study to explore the intentionality of the two schools, however future research might want to consider these kinds of issues, particularly around the values and attitudes of key actors, such as heads of sixth form.

The different kinds of messages schools send out about post-school and HE choices are important because they might shape the way young people conceive of their future options. It is very difficult to say what might account for the quantitative disparities between the two case study schools in their rates of progression to HE and research-intensive HEIs (table 1). However, it could be that the kinds of messages sent out by these schools, might go some way in explaining these variations in rates of progression. Despite their similar intake characteristics, they both differed in the kinds of messages they sent out. The more strongly framed messages sent out at Maple Grove might to some extent explain its higher rate of progression to HE and research-intensive HEIs. Whilst the more weakly framed messages at Oakville might account to some extent for its comparatively lower rates of progression.

The kinds of messages sent out by schools may therefore represent risks and benefits to different students. Those schools which strongly frame post-school choices, and make explicit that you should progress to university, may have a transformatory effect on a few individuals who may not have made the progression otherwise. It may bring about benefits for the individuals in terms of increased labour market success, especially if they progress to research-intensive HEIs. Indeed, progressing to research-intensive HEIs is to some extent correlated with success in the graduate labour market, especially since large companies are increasingly widening their search for talent (Brown et al. 2010). Whilst schools are not going to have a

transformatory effect on every young person, they could make a difference to a few, and so go some way to reducing inequalities in HE participation.

At the same time, strongly framing post-school choices, and marking out university as the only route you should take, could represent significant risks for other young people, particularly in light of increased tuition fees. Firstly, whilst HE participation might result in increased labour market success for some, others may not progress into the kinds of occupations which they had envisaged, due to increasing over-qualification in the graduate labour market. Indeed, around 30% of those in Dolton and Vignoles' (2000) study had greater levels of qualifications than their jobs required six years following graduation. Secondly, it could be that those who do not wish to pursue HE entry may feel pressured to make this progression, and are unable to think about and consider other possible options. Indeed, many of the practices outlined above go against UK and Welsh Government policies which encourage 'impartial' advice and guidance within schools. Some young people may prefer to directly enter employment, or pursue and apprenticeship, but they may not feel comfortable expressing such wishes within a strongly framed school context. An even greater risk, especially in light of increased tuition fees, is that some young people might be pressured into pursuing HE study who may not have done so otherwise and later regret their decision. It has been shown elsewhere that those from lower social class groups are more likely to leave their course of study early, owing to debt and financial worries (Forsyth and Furlong 2003).

This study raises further questions for future research exploring the school to HE transition. It has highlighted the significance of the school context in sending out messages about HE choices. Future research might want to investigate further the role played by schools, especially in the English policy context, which may be encouraging schools to adopt cultures

aimed at facilitating progression to HE and research-intensive HEIs. It might also be worthwhile to explore the implicit messages carried by schools about HE subject choices, or occupational and career destinations. In paying closer attention to the school, it might also be useful to gain an understanding as to why schools might vary in their practices and processes (particularly those with similar intake characteristics).

### **Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful to the schools that took part in this study, including the many young people and staff for offering their time to share their stories. I would also like to thank Sally Power, Rachel Brooks and Sara Delamont for their very helpful and insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article. Thanks also go to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for providing the funding for this research.

## References

Aggleton, P. and Whitty, G. (1985) Rebels without a cause? Socialization and subcultural style among the children of the new middle class, *Sociology of Education*, 58, 60-72

Allat, P. (1993) Becoming privileged. In: Bates, I and Riseborough, G. (eds.) *Youth and inequality*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 139-159

Atkinson, P. (1985) *Language, structure and reproduction: An introduction to the sociology of Basil Bernstein*. London: Routledge

Ball, S. (1981) *Beachside comprehensive: A case-study of secondary schooling*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ball, S., Hull, R., Skelton, M., and Tudor, R. (1984) The tyranny of the “devil’s mill”. In:

Ball, S., Reay, D. and David, M. (2002) 'Ethnic choosing': minority ethnic students, social class and higher education choice, *Race Ethnicity and Education* 5 (4) 333 - 357.

BBC News (2011) *League tables 'may show how many pupils finish degrees'* (online). Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12805272> (Accessed 10th July 2011)

Bernstein, B. (1975) *Class, codes and control, volume 3: towards a theory of educational transmissions*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Boliver, V. (2011) Expansion, differentiation, and the persistence of social class inequalities in British higher education, *Higher Education*, 61 (3), 229-242

Bourdieu, P. (1990) *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brown, P., Lauder, H. and Ashton, D. (2010) *The global auction: the broken promises of education, jobs and rewards*. New York: Oxford University Press

Curtis, C., Power, S., Whitty, G., Exley, S. and Sasia, A. (2008) *Primed for success? The characteristics and practices of state schools with good track records of entry into prestigious UK universities*. London: Sutton Trust.

Dolton, P. and Vignoles, A. (2000) Incidence and effects of overeducation in the UK graduate labour market, *Economics of Education Review*, 19 (2), 179-198.

Donnelly, M. (2014). A new approach to researching school effects on higher education participation, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2014.886942

Forsyth, A. and Furlong, A. (2003) *'Losing out? Socioeconomic disadvantage and experience in further and higher education'* Bristol: The Policy Press

Gillborn, D. and Youdell, D. (2000) *Rationing education: policy, practice, reform and equity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Heath, S., Fuller, A. and Paton, K. (2008) Network-based ambivalence and educational decision-making: a case study of 'non-participation' in higher education, *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2), 219 - 229.

Hutchins, E. and Klausen, T. (2000). Distributed cognition in an airline cockpit, in: Engström, Y. and Middleton, D. (eds.) *Cognition and communication at work*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 15-34

Ingram, N. (2009) Working-class boys, educational success and the misrecognition of working-class culture, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30 (4), 421-434

Kelly, K., & Cook, S. (2007) *Full-time Young Participation by Socio-Economic Class: A New Widening Participation Measure in Higher Education*. London: Department for Education and Skills

Lacey, C. (1970) *Hightown Grammar: the school as a social system*. Manchester: The University of Manchester.



Maguire, M., Hoskins, K., Ball, S. and Braun, A. (2011) Policy discourses in school texts, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(4), 597-609

McDonough, P. (1997) *Choosing colleges: how social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Morais, A., Neves, I., Davies, B., and Daniels, H. (eds) (2001). *Towards a sociology of pedagogy*. New York: Peter Lang

Muller, J., Davies, B., and Morais, A. (eds) (2004). *Reading Bernstein, researching Bernstein*. London: Routledge

National Council for Educational Excellence (2008) *National council for educational excellence: recommendations*. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Oliver, C. and Kettley, N. (2010) Gatekeepers or facilitators: the influence of teacher habitus on students' applications to elite universities, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 31(6), 737-753

Pugsley, L. (2004) *The university challenge: higher education markets and social stratification*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Reay, D. (1998) 'Always knowing' and 'never being sure': familial and institutional habituses and higher education choice, *Journal of Education Policy*, 3(4), 519 - 529.

Reay, D., David, M. and Ball, S. (2001) 'Making a difference?': institutional habitus and higher education choice. *Sociological Research Online* 5(4).

Reay, D., David, M. and Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of choice: social class, race and gender in higher education*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

Welsh Government (2013) *Relationships between the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma and Higher Education*. Cardiff: Welsh Government

Walford, G. (2002) Classification and Framing of the Curriculum in Evangelical Christian and Muslim Schools in England and The Netherlands, *Educational Studies*, 28(4), pp. 403-419

Walford, G. (2007) Classification and framing of interviews in ethnographic interviewing, *Ethnography and Education*, 2(2), 145-157